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### Depiction of Nature in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath

**Abstract:** Sylvia Plath is a remarkable poet of nature. She employs the theme of nature on the canvas of loneliness and longingness in an ebullient way. Nature provides her an outlet to discern and dissipate the rush and gush of vibrant and violent feelings and emotions, and she swerves, swirls stoutly in the mystery and wonders of nature. With the razor sharp tongs of her persona, she universalises her personal pain and ordeal in the spectacle of her lurid poetry.

The present paper, however, unravels the tremors of her blood smearing anguish and agony of her soul in the haze of the serenity of nature, flowers, trees, rocks, sea, sun, moon, and life wishes. She gives grandiose wings to the chariot of her creativity and craftsmanship to soar high in sky by the dint of daring depiction of nature and describing its hues, and adducing an analogy to her own sufferings, pensiveness and pitfalls, and attributing it to the harshness and hostility of nature towards her.

**Key Words:** Love, hate, hurt, reverence, depression, dejection and death.

Sylvia Plath is a popular, protean poetess, who has ensconced a cult stature in the annals of Modern American English poetry irrevocably. Her opulent output of poetry includes *The Colossus* (1960), *Ariel* (1965), *Crossing the Water* (1971) and *Winter Trees* (1971). The

dynamics of her themes range from love, hate, hurt, death, anxiety, angst, frustration, patriarchy, victimization, self, body, aberrations in relationship, and above all her unfathomable and unshakable love and reverence for nature. She is regarded a Post-Romantic poet along with her other contemporaries like Anne Sexton, Emily Dickinson, Robert Bly, Robert Lowell, James Dickey. Ihab Hassan is highly appreciative of the poet and says exultantly in his treatise *Contemporary American Literature* (1972): “The most exacerbated poet of this Post-Romantic company, however, is Sylvia Plath... who writes the verse of grotesque power and originality” (9).

Sylvia Plath’s poetry exudes gloomy, disgruntled, pensive and pessimistic vision of life. Her poetry is seemingly entirely different from that of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelly, and Keats etc. Her poems are tinged tangentially with sadness, horror, hurt, hate, death, and eternity. William Wordsworth finds solace in the lap of nature and depicts various aspects of beauty and truth imbibed and embodied in nature, he feels joy and happiness. On the contrary, Sylvia Plath feels nature’s hostility towards her and her poetry is imbued with images which lead towards death, depression and dejection. Newman eulogises her depiction of nature, and observes nature personifying her in her many poems. We witness gurgling flow of emotions throughout her poetry. Margaret Rees in his review on Ted Hughes’ *Nature Birthday Letters* on World Socialist Web:

Whether Plath wrote about nature, or about the social restrictions on individuals, she stripped away the polite veneer. She let her writing express elemental forces and primeval fears. In doing so, she laid bare the contradictions that tore apart appearance and hinted at some of the tensions hovering just beneath the surface of the American way of life in the post war period (7)”

“Tulips” is a very popular and poignant poem of Plath wherein she channelizes her feelings of dejection, depression, despair and obsession with death. The poem escapes in the

rich bowers of her reverential attitude and love towards nature. The poem takes us to catch the flight of her imagination emanating from insipidness to dynamism, from hatred to love, from emptiness to fulfilment etc. The poem explicates her experiences at hospital and loneliness. Tulip flowers symbolise her dejection and deteriorating health and presents cul-de-sac of her personal plight and pitiable wretchedness. She is a staunch follower of John Keats and turns an image the central metaphor of the poem. The sight of the awfully red tulip flowers reminds and binds her to the earthly pleasure and detracts her from the thought of hurt and humiliation she was subjected to. She thinks herself like little pebbles which the sea waves carry effervescently to the shores. The anguish is writ on her brow and is augmented to see the coaxing of tulips. She shows her life wish, and consequently consecrates to the hospital officials to be propped up and cared of. After the surgery, she gains consciousness and grumbles hostility of tulips towards her, that they diminish her chances of survival and engulf the oxygen earmarked for her. She draws a parallel between the redness of tulips to her own crimson mortification and sufferings. The description of beautiful tulips flowers with sprinkle of vivid colours catapults her as a skilled painter and adept craftsman. Mark the lines of the poem:

The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me.

Even through the gift paper I could hear them breathe

Lightly, through their white swaddlings, like an awful baby.

Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds.

They are subtle: they seem to float, though they weigh me down,

Upsetting me with their sudden tongues and their colour,

A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck (*The Collected Poems* 161).

However, Nature is all pervasive in her works, it becomes a potent prerequisite force to hone her skill and creativity urge. Nature serves as a microphone to amplify and glorify her emotional outburst. She regards poetry a means of self-revelations through images, similes and

metaphors. Most of the poems of her maiden collection *The Colossus* (1960) are invariably nature poems establishing and exhibiting her love and reverence towards nature. “The colossus”, “Poems for a Birthday”, “Two Views of a Cadaver Room”, “Mushrooms”, “Maenad”, “Manor Garden”, “Polly’s Tree”, “Dark Wood, Dark Water”, “Moonrise”, “The Beekeeper’s Daughter”, “Lorelei”, “Elm”, “Lesbos” etc. are the poems that establish earnestly a bond between her self and nature. William Wordsworth renders poetry which is highly subjective, egoistic and natural. Wordsworth regards nature as a mentor and philosopher; but Sylvia Plath’s poetry is entirely different from Wordsworth and other romantics. We witness undercurrent of serenity, sublimity, sensuality, sadness and divinity in their works. In Sylvia Plath’s poetry, we see images of dejection, despair, and death. William Wordsworth considers nature as source of joy; while Sylvia Plath regards a source of melancholy and hostility. Her attitude towards nature coincides and conflates with that of her contemporaries Emily Dickinson, Robert Lowell, and Anne Sexton.

“The Mushrooms” apprises us the enchanting panoramic view of nature, dissipating her experiences at Yadoo while staying with her husband, Ted Hughes. The poem carries us rapturously in the fields of mushrooms and pinpoints their flowering and organic growth. “The Manor Garden” is also a very lurid nature poem, explicates effervescently her experiences of labour pain giving birth to her first child at Yadoo. The poem shows the deserted look of the garden in the autumn season, and trees becoming leafless, tiny plants lifeless. She externalises her thoughts of the unborn child, express her ecstasy and melancholy both. Mark the following lines of the poem “The Manor Garden” to vivify this point:

Two suicides, the family wolves,  
Hours of blankness. Some hard stars  
Already yellow the heavens.  
The spider on its own string

Crosses the lake. The worms

Quit their usual habitations.

The small birds converge, converge

With their gifts to a difficult boring (*The Collected Poems* 125).

Another beautiful nature poem “Water Colour of Grantchester Meadows” reflects her reverence to nature, process of vegetation and her cogent concern for animals. She avers that we are unable to gauge the mysteries of nature. She showcases the grandeur of the landscape, the calmness and tranquillity seems mocking at her fiercely. The poem unravels her brooding self, and a tries to show a boisterous bond between her self and nature. The beauty of nature and grandeur of landscape doesn’t render her peace nor satisfies her emotional appetite. The imagery of moon shows her dissatisfaction and detraction from love life. The cruelty and callousness of the wicked world is symbolised by the savagery of the animals like rat, cat and owl. Her craftsmanship serves as a microphone to amplify and glorify her emotions, and she presents finest blend of allusion, archaism and colloquialism. To validate this point, the following lines are quite apt to look into:

Cloudwrack and owl-hollowed willows slanting over

The bland Granta double their white and green

World under the sheer water

And ride that flux at anchor, upside down.

The punter sinks his pole.

In Byron’s pool

Cat-tails part where the tame cygnets steer (*The Collected Poems* 112).

“Lorelei” is a lovely nature poem, escapes in the valley of her obsession of death. The poem first shows her desire to end the precious life, but soon ejects her preference of life to death. She delineates a very beautiful scape of the river flowing calmly imbibing gurgling pain

underneath at night. The poem describes her earnest wish to develop a communion with the outer world. Sylvia Plath regards considerably the life under water immersed in hope, full of promises and a reservoir of peace. “The Disquieting Muse” is also very florid nature poem, perspicaciously projects her conception of nature and art. The carries us down the memory lane when she witnessed a hurricane in her childhood at New England coast. The poem exhibits her proclivity and panache for the muses and their world, her love for fresh flowers, blue birds, bees, balloons etc. The poem also pinpoints the estranged relationship of a child with the mother. Mark the following lines of the poem:

I woke one day to see you, mother,  
Floating above me in bluest air  
On a green ballon bright with a million  
Flowers and bluebirds that never were  
Never, never, found anywhere.  
But the little planet bobbed away  
Like a soap-bubble as you called: Come here!  
And I faced my travelling companions (*The Collected Poems* 76).

“Moonrise” is another nature gem that radiates her effervescent intent to create an equilibrium between her inner mind and nature. She etches an idea through concrete images: the moon symbolizes death, decay and destruction. The red colours refer to ripeness, responsibility, contentment in life. In the poems “A Winter Ship” and “Two Views of a Cadaver Room”, nature is manifested as hostile to humans. In the latter poem, she identifies herself with the moles who resent broad daylight and works in dark. The poem shows her love and reverence towards nature. Mark the following lines of the poem “Two Views of a Cadaver Room”:

Skirts, sings in the direction  
Of her bare shoulder, while she bends,

Fingering a leaflet of music, over him,  
Both of them deaf to the fiddle in the hands  
Of the death's-head shadowing their song.  
These Flemish lovers flourish; not for long.  
Yet desolation, stalled in paint, spares the little country  
Foolish, delicate, in the lower right hand corner (*The Collected Poems* 114).

In most of her nature poems, we see the image of sea inalterably. Sometimes seascape and landscape coalesce into each other and resultantly turns mindscape to dissipate her mental agony. The images of sea shows her penchant towards sea right from her childhood days. The poem "Blackberrying" entails her virulent and vitriolic emotions and attitude towards outer world. The images of blackberry, fly, sea resembles John Keats' sensuous images. The images employed in Colossus poems serves an outlet to her wild emotions and various vacuous moods. In the scintillating nature poem "Wuthering Heights" she presents an analogy of dejected and depressed moods to the repugnant and rancorous perspectives of nature. She projects her frustration and fierceness as feverishly as her wish to gain gaiety and glory in life. Here is the upshot her emotions as illustrated in the poem "Wuthering Heights":

I come to wheel ruts, and water  
Limpid as the solitudes  
That flee through my fingers.  
Hollow doorsteps go from grass to grass;  
Lintel and still have unhinged themselves,  
Of people the air only  
Remembers a few old syllables.  
It rehearses them moaningly:  
Black stone, black stone (*The Collected Poems* 168).



“Two Campers in Cloud Country” is a florid piece of verse illuminating light on the magnificence of nature mordantly. She depicts enchanting landscape of Rock Lake, Canada surrounded by lush green trees and rocks. “Crossing the Water” presents spurt of landscapes to unravel the blankness and blandness of her mind stridently. “Whitsun” is another poem which highlights her awful negative attitude towards nature. The poet projects the image of sky at night over Southern France to discern her melancholy and macabre thoughts mordantly in the poem “Stars Over the Dordogone”. The poem is a pell –mell of her tormented and turbulent emotions and self. She externalises the beauty of nature by employing charming metaphors and stars glittering in the French sky. She presents nostalgic grace with self-absorbed idioms. Her rhyme pattern seems entwining inextricably with her feelings. Mark the following lines of the poem “Stars Over the Dordogone”:

Where I am at home, only the sparsest stars

Arrive at twilight, and then after some effort.

And they are wan, dulled by much travelling.

The smaller and more timid never arrive at all

But stay, sitting far out, in their own dust.

They are orphans. I cannot see them. They are lost.

But tonight they have discovered this river with no trouble,

They are scrubbed and self-assured as the great planets (*The Collected Poems* 165).

Another poem “Elm” is also a very lurid nature poem woven around the theme of death. The Elm tree with its dark dense and blue boughs symbolises ferocity and death. The moon is used as a symbol of decay and death. The poem also exposes the image of jelly fish. The poem “The Moon and the Yew Tree” fuses external realities into internal events. Jon Rosenblatt is highly appreciative of the appeal the poem proffers: “Plath has moved fluidly from a despairing natural landscape to a hopeful ‘inscape’... The technique of treating objects and colours as

coded messages to self gives the best of the landscapes their distinctiveness (98). The full moon blooming brightly over the yew tree externalises her mental state and vacuous moods. The poem shows that the poet is shrouded in the mist of uncertainty and utter chaos, and is unable to come out of it. She finds an ally in moon. The graveyard is emblem of her solitude, seething anger and anguish. Yew tree, moon, and graveyard represent her inner world whereas outer world is shown by the church. Mark the following lines of the poem “The Moon and the Yew Tree”:

Clouds are flowering

Blue and mystical over the face of the stars.

Inside the church, saints will be all blue,

Floating on their delicate feet over the cold pews,

Their hands and faces stiff with holiness.

The moon sees nothing of this. She is bald and wild.

And the message of the yew tree is blackness-blackness and silence (*The Collected Poems* 173).

“Departure” is one of the most charming pieces of verse soaked in the theme of nature. The poem shows her amorous sojourn with her husband Ted Hughes in a Spanish fishing spot in Benidorm. The poem shows nature’s harshness and hostility towards her. Sylvia Plath’s conjugal life is not running that swift and smooth as she had expected to. The poem shows her loneliness and despair. Like Wordsworth and other romantic poets, she doesn’t feel solace in the lap of nature, rather she finds nature mortifying her. The beauty of the landscape seems them morbid and malevolent. The poem exposes Plath’s inability to develop harmony with nature and a sympathetic chord. She feels disdained and disparaged by nature, and grumbles against its desultory indifference. See the following lines of the poem:

Retrospect shall not soften such penury-

Sun's brass, the moon's steely patinas,  
The leaden slag of the world-  
But always expose  
The scraggy rock spit shielding the town's blue bay  
Against which the brunt of outer sea  
Beats, is brutal endlessly (*The Collected Poems* 51)

Over and above, the poem "Lesbos" also apprises us with her profound penchant for nature. The poem egresses a cogent compendium of love and hatred, heal and heart, weal and woes, a conflict between internal and external world. The image of the sea are subjective as well as objective. She attains glory by grandiose employment of imagery. With strident sound to reverberate the central theme from all perspectives and viewpoints, her images exerts focus and force on the intended inference. She etches out her tapestry of poetry like a skilled surgeon selecting his tools, exhibits sheen of the radiance of her peerless craftsmanship. Her love and reverence for nature chisels her skill and craftsmanship. The land scape shown in the poem refers to death and destruction. A. R. Jones observes rightly: "the relationship between the inner and the outer worlds is fractured, the outer world holding up a mirror in which the inner world can see its distorted self (22).

In "Winter Trees", Plath compares trees with women. The poem is an outcry of the poet against the patriarchal world's apathy and partisan attitude towards women. She says that trees spawn trees easily and steadily, while women undergo horrid and horrific ordeal. The poem bares her mental agony and upheavals she was forced to face in her life. The hatred, shabby treatment extended by patriarchal set up couldn't undermine her courage to live; instead they proved catalysts to fortify her resolution to gallop. Riding on the fastidious horse, she develops harmony with the universe, galaxy of stars, and planets etc in compared to serenity of death. She showcases the plunge of the dew in the pool of dawn. In "Getting There", she she

exemplifies the journey of life to transcend physical death to attain salvation. The dewdrops she uses in the poem “Ariel”, heralds a metamorphosis of the dark into the cauldron of morning. The dew sparkles the sky and paves path of the new era of eternity.

To sum up, we may add that Sylvia Plath observes nature in the tumult of revolt. Her irresistible interest in nature is reflected and refracted in many poems. Her poetry externalises her stance against the destruction of nature, a concern that finds finest expression in many poems. Her description and depiction of landscapes and seascapes are very appealing, the setting is exactly immersed in her various vacuous moods. She employs lustrous landscapes captured in the succession of wonderful striking images, many of them are personified: the moon, the sea, the rocks, the flowers, the sky, the trees etc. Mythical and mystical qualities inherent in nature permeate throughout her entire poetic cosmos. Sylvia Plath transmutes trauma into finest striking images and thus finds a vent to her fast flowing gurgling emotions. Louis Simpson’s appraisal of her poetry is quite quotable here as he finds influence of Sir James’s *The Golden Bough* and Robert Graves’s *The White Tiger* regarding her treatment of nature: “This was how Sylvia Plath began-the wonder is that she changed into a true poet. The poet of *Ariel* is filled with a passion of words. Writing of this kind does not depend on mythology- is original. This is why Sylvia Plath is such an important poet: she “transcends” ‘The Golden Bough’ and ‘The White Goddess’ just as she transcends her personal history (123).

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